The Best of Both Worlds: Adapting ESL Methodology to the EFL Environment

By Mary C. Black

The vast majority of students of English are not found in native-speaking countries such as England and the United States but spread out in countries all over the globe. Nevertheless, the majority of ESL/EFL methods and approaches are developed in native-speaker settings, especially in the U.S., and much literature in the field is thus oriented toward teaching students in the ESL environment.

However, as anyone who has taught both ESL and EFL knows, there are cultural and logistical circumstances which make a strict application of current ESL trends inappropriate, if not impossible, abroad. Developing a teaching approach that is both in step with current American methodology, yet fits the culture and logistical circumstances overseas, is the challenge facing most serious English schools around the world, and one which the Instituto de Estudios Norteamericanos (IEN) in Barcelona, Spain, has successfully met. In this article, I will summarize our approach as we communicate it both to teachers and students in the hope that this approach will be a useful guideline for other English schools around the world, and perhaps even for ESL programs.

Like many private and government-affiliated institutions around the world, the IEN teaches general English primarily to adults in classes which meet three hours per week. The entire program, if completed at a normal pace, takes five years, and students study English in addition to their primary activity (generally work or university).

Our students come from a cultural and educational background quite distinct from that in the U.S. Education in Spain is much more rigorous and traditional; there is a strong emphasis on information and memorization and little on personal development. The teacher here is central to the classroom, and students are little more than passive note takers. Failure in school is a common occurrence, even at the elementary level. The system is elitist, especially in high schools and universities, and while it leaves little room for the personal expression and creative development so emphasized in American education, it does produce a highly literate population with a good level of general knowledge. In this aspect, its values and methods stand in stark contrast to the U.S. educational system, but are very similar to the education in most other countries around the world where EFL is taught.

Our students, like many EFL students, come to study for two reasons: either to learn how to use English, especially for speaking and to a lesser degree writing; or to obtain a certificate; or both, as is the case with the majority. Those students that want to learn to speak need English in their work or for job interviews. They also need English for their leisure time, to travel or meet tourists that come to Spain, or to better understand American culture as it appears in movies, music, or literature. At the same time, those that want a certificate-in Spain and many countries

around the world certificates are required for everything-need to know and be able to use the structure and vocabulary of English.

The IEN hires its teachers from the United States, and the majority have Master's degrees in TEFL or applied linguistics from American universities. Thus, our teachers come here equipped with the stereotypical American dynamism and energy, while also bringing the latest in English teaching methodology. My task as Academic Director of the IEN is to translate this into an approach that blends the best of current ESL methodology and the educational system here, while adapting to the constraints and circumstances of the EFL setting and the needs of our students.

Our approach establishes a reasonable standard among teachers without depriving them of their creativity and uniqueness in the class. Since what we do is usually unfamiliar to students, we also describe our methodology to them, not only to explain what we do, but also to explain why we do it. Below is an outline of the guidelines we give to teachers in their initial and in-service training, and the message that we give to our students. The purpose of both the teacher training and the learner training is to get both parties working together toward the mutually compatible goals of helping our students learn English while helping our staff realize their potential as teachers.

Teacher Training

To the teachers, we characterize our teaching goals with the two key words: *communication* and *rigor* ; that is, we apply a communicative approach within a rigorous framework. To achieve these aims, we stress the interaction of three elements: *pacing, content,* and *evaluation*.

Pacing

Pacing relates to the rhythm of a class and the degree to which class time is used well. Since students study only three hours per week, we try to maximize the time by doing activities that can be done only in class; that is, activities which require the presence of either the teacher or the classmates. This can include grammar exercises that are not rote or that are done or checked with partners, or grammar explanations when students are not clear on a point. However, class time is spent mainly on activities in which the students use the language by speaking and listening, and to a lesser degree writing and reading. Class time is also spent giving students feedback on their performance.

Pacing in the class not only involves knowing what to spend class time on but also involves knowing what to leave for homework. Rote grammar exercises, long readings, writing, and other individual activities that require time and reflection more than the presence of a teacher or classmate are ideal candidates for homework. The greatest measure of good pacing is that students leave each class feeling that they have learned something concrete, either that they have practiced a lot or that they have acquired more knowledge about the language, and that the time in class has been well spent.

Content

The second element of a rigorous class is the content. We divide the content into three parts: *input, focus on structure,* and *output* . Input means that students are given rich and varied exposure to English; they are literally bombarded with aural and written English at the appropriate level. This input is provided both in class and in such homework assignments as reading/listening/vocabulary journals, seeing movies in English, and reading authentic texts or graded readers. The idea is to give students maximum exposure to the English language in forms as authentic as possible given the level (See Krashen 1985).

However, input alone will not lead to students' learning how to use the language. In order to achieve accurate output, students must learn how the structure of the language works. For many years, ESL/EFL theory in the U.S. argued against the explicit teaching of structure, with the idea that through exposure, students would eventually "get it," and that by getting it themselves they are more likely to retain it. This has some validity-certainly eliciting structures from students and learning through discovery have their advantages. But avoiding an explicit focus on grammar is not only considered in recent literature as an inefficient way for students to learn (See Pica 1994, Williams 1995), it is especially inappropriate in the EFL environment. In the native environment, ESL students have lots of input and direct response to their output-if they use incorrect structures or accents, native speakers probably will not understand them and they will have to adjust their language accordingly. This tends not to happen in the EFL environment since the other students, and frequently the teacher too, understand the inter- language (in our case, Spanglish) perfectly well, maybe even better than native English! ESL students also have much greater exposure to correct English than EFL students do, making it more likely that they will, in fact, "pick up" correct English. But for EFL students, teachers are possibly the only, and certainly the main, source of native English. If students do not learn correct structure from us, where will they learn it? Furthermore, because students overseas are accustomed to the traditional style of education in which the teacher is the expert and students are passive absorbers of knowledge, EFL students generally expect the teacher to "teach" and explain things to them. Despite the previous trend in the United States discouraging teachers from taking on the role of sole expert and authority, recent literature is returning to this authoritative role as an important one, if not the only one, for teachers (See Harmer 1991, Prodromou 1991).

This is not to say that the only acceptable way to teach is teacher-centered, structure-oriented classes. ESL methodology has come too far to revert back to this, despite the cultural preferences and logistical problems inherent in most EFL situations. There is definitely room for elicitation and other indirect ways of teaching as long as students make good use of class time and as long as in the end they all understand the structure. At the IEN, the basic schema we follow for teaching grammar involves telling or eliciting a structure, making comprehension checks to make sure that all students understand it, and reinforcing the structure with clear board work. Board work helps students who learn visually or kinesthetically and ensures that students have good notes for future reference. Logically, the question that teachers should be asking themselves as they make lesson plans and spontaneous decisions in the classroom is: Am I choosing the best way to convey this to students so that they learn it in the most efficient way

possible? After all, what we really want is to make the structural part of class as streamlined as possible in order to spend more time on communication or real use of the language.

This leads to the third element in the content of our classes: output. Students are given rich input in order to learn what good English looks and sounds like. They are given the rules of the language so that they know how to put the elements together correctly. And finally, they are given opportunities to practice and express themselves in English in both written and spoken forms. Written practice is done largely outside of class although there are certainly times when writing in class is valuable. However, speaking practice occupies a large part of class time and is achieved not only through a communicative approach in which students participate actively, but also through specific speaking activities. And for both written and spoken output, error correction takes place to ensure that students are learning and improving from their practice, especially since they lack the real-life feedback that ESL students receive outside the class.

Evaluation

The last element of our classes is evaluation. The easiest element of language to measure is grammar, which is why it is evaluated most frequently. Certainly students' knowledge of grammar needs measuring, since in the end it will determine their ability to understand and produce the language. However, grammar is neither the only nor the most important element, because in reality it is only the structure of language, not language itself in the functional sense of a system of communication between people. In this sense, language is the four skills: *reading, writing, listening,* and *speaking* , and these skills are also measured, particularly the productive skills. Speaking is evaluated both by continuous assessment of students' spontaneous performance in classroom interactions and activities, and in more formal situations such as presentations and debates. Students frequently have the mistaken idea that speaking is "fun" and grammar is "really" language. We try to dispel that myth not only by explaining *why* we spend so much time on speaking (see below), but also by making it a large part of the final grade. Writing is also assessed, not so much to turn our students into master writers, but rather to use it as an assessment tool which indicates more accurately than a typical fill-in-the-blank test a student's understanding of how students can use English structure, vocabulary, and expression.

Evaluation involves not only *what* to evaluate, but also *how* to evaluate it. This is essential in a society in which grading tends to be tough, and a program's prestige is measured by its difficulty. We encourage teachers to maintain high standards when evaluating students' work and progress. Evaluation is based on students' language production, not on their attitudes in class. In other words, we evaluate results and progress, not effort. We also communicate this evaluation constantly to the students, giving them each a sense of their progress and indicating where they need to improve.

Thus, the IEN's approach is defined by the two key elements of communication and rigor. We stress to teachers that we in no way view these elements as separable; rather they occur simultaneously. The idea is to blend the two: focusing on structure during communicative activities (e.g., error correction), and making grammar activities communicative (e.g., doing exercises in pairs). This approach not only fits our students' reasons for studying English, it also

fits in with current trends in ESL methodology which attempt to balance and take the best from the traditional structural methods and more recent communicative methods. The approach is specific enough to give teachers guidelines on planning and implementing their classes, but flexible enough to allow them to design their classes based on their own and their students' individual needs and interests. The approach is constantly evolving to meet our students' changing needs and to keep pace with relevant changes in ESL methodology.

Learner Training

So how do we communicate our approach to our students? Like many in EFL situations, our students are used to a traditional, passive, grammar-oriented way of learning languages. And, if they have studied in other private academies in Barcelona, they have probably been promised miraculous results by studying with a computer a few hours per week. Needless to say, they are confounded when they first come to the IEN and spend so much class time on what they consider to be "frivolous" activities (i.e., speaking), and so little time on "real" activities (i.e., grammar). They also are suspicious when our teachers tell them that they are responsible for their own learning. To explain to them how language learning works, how we will proceed, and what we expect of them inside and outside the classroom, we distribute a handout about their roles and responsibilities in learning English (See Figure 1 below).

Teachers go over the handout with students at the beginning of the term, spending class time reading and discussing it. In the higher levels, some teachers even use the Spanish version of the form as a translation exercise into English to test students' knowledge of vocabulary and native structure and expressions. The results frequently reinforce the message to the students that they must each make an effort outside the classroom if they want to reach their desired level.

The text, which is periodically updated, follows a simple question and answer format to simulate a conversation between a teacher and a student.

This handout accomplishes three tasks at once: It explains our teaching approach, it explains the nature of language learning in lay terms with everyday analogies, and it motivates students to study and practice outside of class. Handing it out implicates teachers in the approach and helps them work through the rationale with the students.

I hope that the IEN's approach, as explained both to teachers and students, can be of use to other EFL programs which face the same circumstances particular to overseas environments that we face at the IEN. I also hope that this approach is useful to ESL programs as a balanced mean between traditional and communicative language teaching.

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References

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Figure 1

Learning English is like:

____history
____tennis
____geography

A lot of people think that learning a language involves simply acquiring knowledge like learning history or geography. But learning a language is a lot more like learning tennis-it involves learning a skill, whereas learning history or geography simply involves learning a set of facts or a body of knowledge. Facts and knowledge are static, but skills like tennis or English are living and changing and need constant practice. They are spontaneous activities between two or more people. And just as in a tennis game you never know where the ball will land next, in English you can never predict what another person will say.

How can students learn to face any kind of situation in English?

In tennis, what leads to a good game is practice, and this involves not only learning the rules of the game and doing repetitive drills, but also spontaneous practice with real partners. It is the same with English. What leads to mastery of the language is not only learning the "rules of the game"-grammar and doing repetitive drills, but also spontaneous practice with real partners, your classmates.

Why should I practice with my classmates instead of the teacher?
They don't know any more than I do.

More practice leads to more progress in your abilities. Just as someone learning tennis does not always have to play with a pro to improve, it is more important for students to spend *more* time talking to their partners rather than less time talking to the teacher. That is why we organize our classes to maximize the amount of time each student

speaks. While students speak with the classmates, the teacher circulates from group to group to correct errors, provide vocabulary, evaluate your progress and help with problems. This way students have the "best of both worlds"-more speaking practice than in a traditional class where the only exchange is teacher-to-student, with the benefit of the attention and expertise of the teacher.

So if practice is so important, is grammar necessary at all?

It certainly is. Grammar is the structure and rules of the language. Correct grammar is necessary in order to be able to communicate effectively. And the teacher will definitely spend class time explaining grammar and clearing up your questions so that students can practice it correctly. But we think that doing repetitive grammar drills in class is not maximizing your class time because it is something that students could do at home, without your classmates or the teacher. Since we have only three hours of class per week, we prefer focusing only on those activities which require the presence of other students or the teacher.

So should students practice in class and do grammar exercises at home?

English is like learning tennis; it does not only require taking lessons, it also requires hours and hours of practice. In addition to in-class practice, to really improve and advance, students need to make an effort to use English outside of class-not just doing grammar exercises, but also reading books and magazines, writing letters and compositions, seeing movies, listening to music, and speaking to other people.